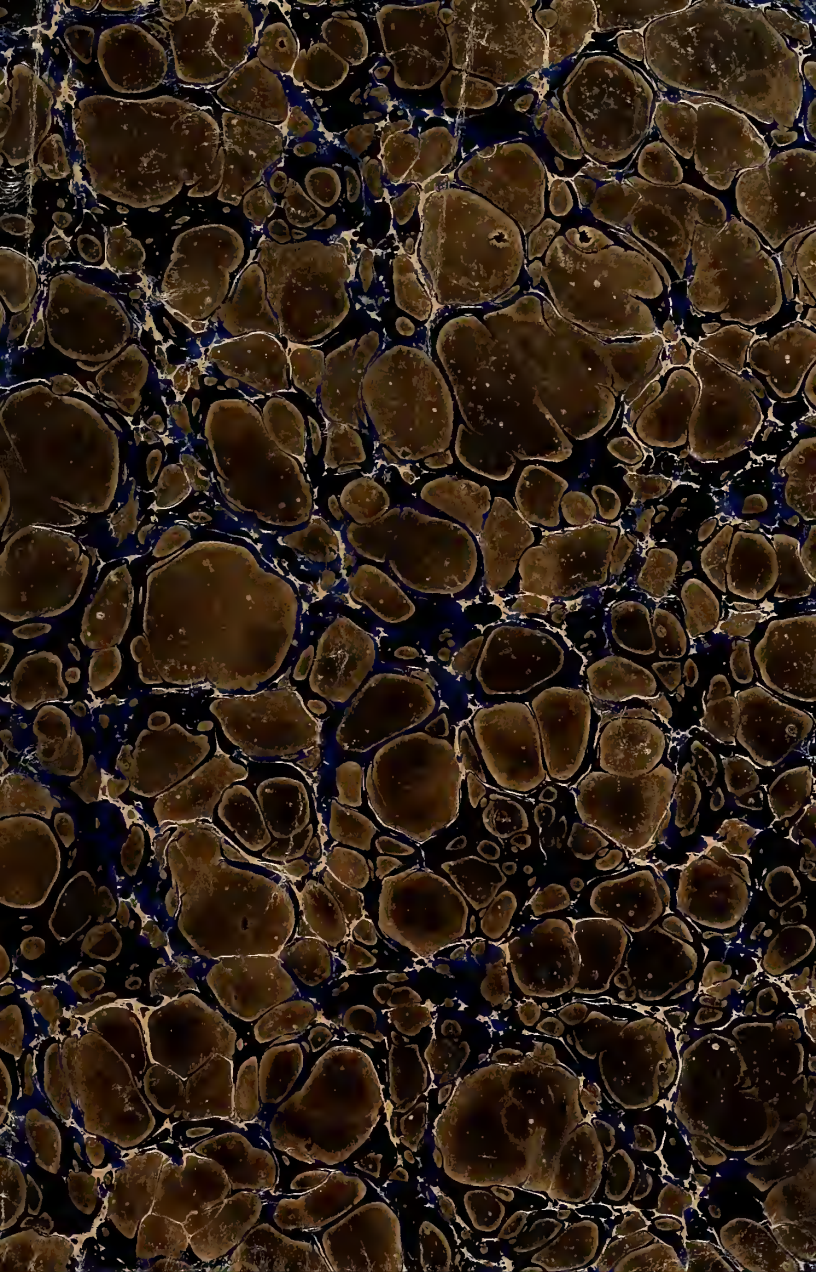

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A WORD FROM HOLLAND

ON THE

TRANSVAAL QUESTION.

A reply to Sir Bartle Frere and an appeal to the people of England.

BY

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A WORD FROM HOLLAND

ON THE

TRANSVAAL QUESTION.

Sir Bartle Frere has favoured the Dutch public with a mark of esteem that we highly appreciate. He has informed the editors of the „Gids" that it would afford him great pleasure, if his recent article in the „Nineteenth Century", in which to his countrymen he pleads on behalf of the policy of the English Government towards the Transvaal, could be brought under the notice of our people in a Dutch translation, inserted in the pages of our most widely-read periodical. In compliance with this request, one of the editors, Mr. de Beaufort, has made a copious extract from this article and communicated it to the readers of the „Gids", adding to it a refutation of such statements as appeared to be inaccurate. This he has done with all the courtesy and delicacy that are to be expected in a man of his station and character. He has not denied the deep emotion with which we, Dutchmen, remain spectators, neutral spectators of what is taking place between powerful England and our powerless kinsmen in the Transvaal. Whoever has the penetration to discern an author's meaning, however quiet and

courteous be the language in which it is conveyed, will find in the refutation of Mr. de Beaufort everything he requires to enable him to form an accurate idea of our opinions and our mood.

The writer purposely adverts to the kindly feelings which are entertained in our country towards England. „At this juncture, he says, it are these prevailing sentiments of friendship and affection which restrain our people from a too boisterous display of their sympathy with the combatant Boers in South Africa."

Quite right. But there is stil another reason why we subdue our feelings, and as yet express but half of what is stirring in us. We cannot yet believe that England will accomplish what she has begun. We flatter ourselves that she will become sensible of her mistake, ere it is too late, and we wish to avoid everything that might offend or irritate the proud nation, which perseveres, unwillingly no doubt, in a policy undertaken without its consent. This circumspection, then, I praise, and recommend my countrymen to continue to observe it. But, on the other hand, let us not carry it too far. Let us keep back every word that might cause unnecessary pain, but let our opinions be clearly and fully expressed. Sir Bartle Frere has, I may say, solicited our judgment on his defence of English policy, for he has expressed a desire to have it brought under our notice. It is a duty incumbent on us to reply to him. I, therefore, venture, not only in my own name, but in that of thousands, tens of thousands of my countrymen, to set forth, at greater length than Mr. de Beaufort has done in the „Gids", why we deem his defence absolutely unsatisfactory, and why we abide by the opinions briefly expressed in our former address to the English nation.

Could I express myself with as much propriety in English as in my native tongue, I should make use of that language; for what I write is addressed in the first place to the people of England. As goodnaturedly as we have tried to comply with the wishes of Sir Bartle Frere, may some noble-minded Englishman, who understands Dutch, undertake to be my interpreter 1).

What I especially regret in Sir Bartle Frere's paper is the absence of any mention of the conditions under which Sir Theophilus Shepstone was impowered by Her Majesty the Queen to annex any territory in South Africa. To form an opinion on the justice of the incorporation of the Transvaal, this condition is of the utmost importance; it runs thus:

„That no such proclamation should be issued by you with respect to any district, territory or state, *unless you be satisfied that the inhabitants thereof desire to become our subjects.*"

Whence this saving clause? The reason is obvious. There existed a treaty by which, on the 17 of January 1852, England unconditionally acknowledged the independence of the Transvaal, in these words:

„The Assistant Commissioners guarantee in the fullest manner on the part of the British Government to the emigrant farmers of the Vaal River the right to manage their own affairs and to govern themselves according to their own laws, without any interference on the part of the British Government."

An incorporation of the Transvaal would thus be an act of perfidy and an outrage, unless it could be

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1) By the care of the Dutch Transvaal Committee this wish has been complied with

proved either that the people of the Transvaal themselves had violated the treaty, or that the majority of them desired their territory to be incorporated.

The former reservation could not be alleged as a justification; the people of the Transvaal had at least observed the treaty quite as faithfully as the English Government. It is true, an attempt has been made to accuse the Boers of infringing an important article in the treaty, by which slavery was prohibited in the Republic. But in vain. Since the annexation the English Government has not found a single slave to be emancipated in the territory of the Transvaal. Neither does Sir Bartle Frere venture to repeat this accusation, nor does he lay to the Boers any charge of having ever infringed the treaty. No such infraction having been made, it is evident then, that England's breaking of a treaty and subjecting a nation, whose independence she not only acknowledged but in the fullest manner guaranteed, must be qualified as an act of shameful perfidy, unless it can be proved that the inhabitants, or a majority of them at least, desired the incorporation? Hence, in that case only, does Her Majesty sanction the issuing of the proclamation. Did the majority of the Boers express a desire for annexation? Whether Sir Theophilus Shepstone really imagined such a desire had been manifested, or not, we need not now inquire. The lawfulness of the annexation does not depend on what he imagined, but on what actually took place. If we inquire what really took place, we immediately find that the late President of the Republic, on the very day before the proclamation was published, and as soon as he was informed of what was intended, publicly protested against it in these words:

„Pretoria, 11th of April 1877.

„Whereas I, Thomas François Burgers, State President of the South African Republic, have received a despatch (dated the 9th instant) from her British Majesty's Special Commissioner, Sir Theophilus Shepstone, informing me that his Excellency has resolved in the name of Her Majesty's Government, to bring the South African Republic by annexation under the authority of the British Crown; and whereas I have not the Power to draw the sword with good success for the defence of the independence of this State against a superior Power as that of England. and moreover feel totally disinclined, in consideration of the welfare of the whole of South Africa, to involve the white inhabitants in a disastrous war by any hostile action on my part, *without having employed beforehand all means to secure the rights of the people in a peaceful way*, so I do hereby, in the name of, and by authority of, the Government and the people of the South African Republic, solemnly protest against the intended annexation."

In the eyes of sir Bartle Frere this protest signifies but little; he sees nothing in it but a „dramatic finale" to Mr. Burgers's unsuccessful attempt to govern the Transvaal. Nor is such an explanation altogether preposterous. Every action may be the result of dissimulation as well as of sincerity. How are we then to distinguish sincerity from dissimulation? We ought, I think, to proceed as we do in explaining a word which admits of more than one interpretation. In the case of a word we examine the context, and in the case of an action we ascertain how far it is consistent with previous and subsequent actions. What

were the antecedents of the Republic, in whose name Mr. Burgers so vigorously protested? The facts are so well known, that it is almost superfluous to give a reply to this question; few words will suffice.

In order to withdraw from British rule, the people of the Transvaal had not many years before left their country in the Cape Colony, to seek a new fatherland in the wilderness.

Which is more likely then, that a protest, made in their name against the incorporation of their state with English territory, should have been a mere pretence, or made in real earnest? What followed the act as well as what had preceded it, supplies us with an answer.

When, in spite of the protest, the annexation was carried out, a folks-meeting was held, at wich Messrs. Kruger, Jorissen and Joubert were selected to go to England and once more to present a protest to the English Goverment.

Nor does this fact weigh very much with Sir Bartle Frere. It were, according to him, „chiefly educated foreigners and strangers, who, when it was discovered, that the new *régime* would interfere with the position of many men," incited the Boers against British rule. This explanation too might be possible, if we had to deal with an isolated fact and not with a link in a whole chain of facts.

The three deputies made their journey in vain. Every one knows it; in Downing Street their prayers were not listened to.

Sir Bartle Frere, indeed, doubts whether they were really in earnest. Some, he says, suspected that this protest was a mere „make-believe exhibition. intended to satisfy the more advanced malcontents that

every thing had been done to relieve their conscience for acquiescing in annexation."

Sir Bartle, as you see, is not very credulous. I am mistaken, very credulous he is; he eagerly believes loose reports and unlikely suppositions, but he is exceedingly reluctant to believe in the sincerity and honesty of professions and actions. We, Dutchmen, have a proverb: „As is the host, so does he trust his guests." Does this maxim perhaps explain the propensity of Sir Bartle Frere? I do not for a moment doubt but that in daily intercourse the Baronet is as sincere as any of us, and reciprocally inclined to believe those, with whom he converses, sincere and honest. But in his official character he is distrustful, and not without reason. In the official circle at the Cape sincerity will, indeed, be the rule, but a rule, to which. I imagine, so many exceptions are allowed, that a veteran official like Sir Bartle Frere in the management of affairs is much more likely to suppose an exception to the rule than an application of it. This is just what the Transvaal Triumvirate complain of. They believe in the sincerity of the Englich people and of its Imperial Government, but they maintain that the intermediate personages often labour under the same complaint as Sir Bartle Frere. — But let us return to the course of events.

In England the Transvaal deputies were assured that, since their departure, their fellow-citizens had quite changed their minds, and that by far the majority were reconciled to the annexation. On returning home they found this to be a misrepresentation, and to convince the Government in England, they caused a Memorial of adhesion to the protest to be signed by all such citizens as were entitled to the suffrage.

Sir Theophilus Shepstone instantly exerted himself to counteract this movement, declaring that its leaders were rendering themselves liable to fines, imprisonment and other severe penalties. The movement nevertheless proceeded and the Memorial was signed by 6591 of the about 8000 enfranchised citizens. With this Memorial Messrs. Kruger and Joubert again set out for England, in the hope that the Government would now be convinced that the people of the Transvaal had not desired the annexation, but detested it more and more. Again was their mission fruitless. Whoever wishes to read a detailed account of their negotiation with the representative of Her Majesty's Government, Sir M. Hicks Beach, will find all the papers that were exchanged, in a pamphlet published by order of the London Transvaal Committee. They are all worthy of a careful perusal. They show us that, already in this negotiation, Messrs. Kruger and Joubert displayed the same earnestness, the same resolution, the same moderation, by which they have now, in warfare, won the esteem and reverence of the whole world.

Misunderstanding was no longer possible; on this occasion the parties were at no loss to understand each other's meaning. The deputies clearly perceived that the English Government would never be led by pacific means to reverse the annexation. In the Memorial, which they presented, it was, therefore, stated in so many words, that this was the last effort that would be made to obtain justice in a peaceful way: „*the last means to obtain their end by peaceable measures*," and that the people was firmly resolved not to be „*subject to any power whatsoever.*" Sir M. Hicks Beach was far from overlooking this declaration; he purposely dwelt on it, and earnestly warned the deputies that, should

they resort to any other than pacific means, the saddest consequences would ensue for all those that undertook them. He left nothing untried, neither promise of all kinds of concessions, nor menaces, to extort from the deputies a promise that, on their return home, they would dissuade the people from all armed opposition. But they were not willing to bind themselves to anything, and on their part constantly urged that their countrymen would never remain satisfied, until their independence had been restored. If, on their departure, the English Government did not conclude that the people of the Transvaal might at any moment break out into revolt, they, like Sir Bartle Frere, were unable to distinguish between the plain words of an honest man and the equivocations of a quasi-diplomatist. What Messrs. Kruger and Joubert had spoken, the Boers, under their leading, have made good. After all pacific means had been tried in vain, nothing was left but to begin, with fervent prayers to the God of righteousness, that struggle for liberty and right which they had previously announced as imminent. As to the issue of this struggle, if England should persist in it, they are under no illusion. But they put their trust in the God of their fathers, whom it may please to open the eyes of the English people and enable them to see what they are about.

If then we examine the words and actions of the people of the Transvaal in their natural order, it will appear as clear to us as the noon-day sun, that Sir Bartle Frere has not the slightest reason to doubt the sincerity of those who had signed the protests, and that it is an undeniable fact that the Boers, from the very outset, would have nothing to do with the annexation. With inflexible resolution all their

words and all their deeds indicate their purpose of first trying all means of persuasion, and should these not avail, of shaking off, sword in hand, the yoke which had been imposed upon them. Sir Bartle Frere is astonished, that, when he was at Pretoria with only 200 soldiers, and no others within a circuit of 200 miles, the Boers did not do him the least violence. They knew, he says, that their superior numbers enabled them to undertake whatever they pleased, and they undertook nothing. From this he, of course, again concludes that their opposition was not earnestly meant.

How is it possible to be so blinded! It is just this refraining from all violence, as long as there existed the slightest chance of a pacific settlement, that makes their determination all the more conspicuous. Just those, who wait so long ere they begin, persevere to the end. Whoever possesses such unwearied patience clings tenaciously to his purpose. But Sir Bartle Frere, with all his craft, with all his pliancy, is quite unable to understand such simple, sedate and earnest natures.

Thus did the annexation take place, though the condition, laid down by the Queen, had not been complied with. It was effected, not with the consent of the people, but in opposition to their desires and contrary to the terms of a treaty most solemnly contracted. It can be regarded in no other light than as an act of perfidy and tyranny, of surprise and usurpation. That it was effected for a good purpose, and, as was pretended, in the interests both of England and South Africa, can justify it neither to the Boers, whose existence was threatened by it, nor to the English nation, whose honour and reputation have been tarnished by it. To England there is but one course open: let her annul the act of shame, redress the grievance,

and restore the liberty to a people, who have proved themselves so worthy of it.

For how very differently do these despised Boers appear to us in the hour of trial, than English officials were in the habit of describing them! How gloriously does their behaviour since the annexation avenge the scorn with which, in consequence of misunderstanding rather than calumny, they had been treated. They are „too cowardly to be merciful", a missionary has said of them, who perhaps with too much levity arrived at a general conclusion from one or two cases. We, however, can now reverse the assertion, and say: Men, who are so courageous in the combat, and so free from presumption after a glorious victory, cannot possibly have those defects which prejudice has imputed to them. They are — not in power, not in science, not in refinement — but in energy, in heroic courage, in humanity and in faith the equals, if not the superiors of every European nation, the English not excepted.

How is it that so many in England are blind to what is so unmistakably evident? If there is any statesman in the world capable of appreciating the special virtues of the Boers, it is, without any doubt, Mr. John Bright. We Dutchmen, too, know full well this man of inflexible integrity, who scorns the crooked ways and insidious arts of a policy of expediency, whose yes is yes, and whose no is no. With delight we have contemplated his political life, and we have felt refreshed at the sight of a man, moving in the political world, without being tainted with its dishonesty. And this man, — it is not to be believed — publicly declares that he thinks it not only likely, but even probable, that Messrs. Kruger and Joubert, men of the same character and temper as himself, will conclude a peace

by which, at variance with all their words and deeds, they will quietly renounce their independence! If he would but enter into himself and hold counsel with his own nature, he might know that it is the reed which bends, but the oak that breaks. For eighty years did the Beggars (les Gueux), ancestors of the Boers, wage a struggle against despotism. Ere Spain could have ruled over Holland, it would have had to annihilate them. Does England wish to learn by experience how much the descendants resemble their forefathers?

Do not misinterprete me. Do not suppose, that I wish to place the rule of Spain in the 16th century and that of England in the 19th on the same line. For myself, I would as well live under Queen Victoria as under King William. My grand-parents were subjects of George III, and the honour of Old England is hardly less dear to me than the honour of my native land. But the people of the Transvaal, whether rightly or wrongly, will not submit to foreign domination. Already once have they turned their backs on the land of their birth, rather than live under a foreign government and foreign laws. No one in the world has any right to compel them to give up their love of self-government. Be assured that every effort to that end will fail. They will, like their forefathers, wage an unequal struggle till they either gain their object or perish in the attempt. Unless England restores their independence, the only possible peace she can conclude with them, is that which Tacitus describes to us in a single stroke: the devastation of the country and the annihilation of its people. With such a peace who would more to be pitied, the inglorious victors, or the glorious slain?

But I should unconsciously be led to speak of the interests of England, and yet I wish but to speak of her duty. Although in this case duty and interest are connected, I do not appeal to interests well understood, but only to the sense of duty of a nation that may, indeed, in consequence of a misunderstanding, commit an act of injustice, but is not capable of preferring its supposed interest to the performance of a well recognised duty.

This is the Transvaal question from a Dutch point of view. — Confront it with the statement of Sir Bartle Frere, and let the sound common-sense and the honest conscience of the English people then decide which view is the true one.

In conclusion just one word more from Holland on what England is about to do. From far and wide it assembles regiments of infantry, cavalry and artillery to lead them, under the command of her most skilful general, against the Transvaal. The minister of war, Mr. Childers, has assured Parliament, that, when General Roberts assumes the command, 15000 men will stand in battle array.

What does England purpose doing with such a force? What does it wish to prove by such a display of military power?

That a nation of forty millions can subdue a nation of forty thousand?

This needs no proof, there is no one who doubts it.

That a well trained army, provided with every requisite and led by an excellent general, can crush a band of farmers, who have no other defence than their rifles and the righteousness of their cause?

This needs no proof either.

What then?

That England in the 19th century, under a ministry of which Mr. Gladstone is the head and Mr. John Bright one of the members, does not scruple to abuse thus her superior power?

Yes, God be thanked, this may still be doubted, and we Dutchmen will not believe it before we see it.

Leiden, 8th of March 1881.

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